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In the Absence of My Lord

ERIN McGRAW

EILEEN WENT TO STAND by the railing as soon as she boarded. Port, aft, closest to the dock. As the boat pulled away from the thin strings of colored lights and the sparse crowd — this was the season to come to Ibiza, not to leave it — she strained to see something of Formentera, some rocky shadow in the dark. She knew it was impossible to find the island on a moonless night, but she continued to stare towards the south while the boat moved quietly north to Barcelona. For the night, she could be still. The next day she would move quickly, fall into the old patterns of travel that she had learned over five years, would move herself from Spain to Paris, Paris to New York. Once she was in America she would decide again what to do, and would try to understand what had happened. It seemed impossible, in that quiet night, to think of any new decision — difficult enough to be travelling alone, without Martha's presence to shelter and obscure her. Difficult enough, finally to have left her.

She and Martha had come to Formentera in the same way that they had come everywhere else; it was a new place for them to go, to stay for a few weeks or months until they were ready to move again, away from the sun or back to a city with parks and museums and night clubs. It made very little difference where they were, most of the time; they would stay long enough to learn their way around, to see the monuments and cathedrals, and they spent the largest part of their time just walking, looking, learning the feel of neighborhoods and countrysides. They never joined other people, never entered into friendly conversations with natives or other travelers. When they first arrived, men smiled at Martha, crossed railroad platforms or streets to talk to her, and she answered with studied uninterest until they went away. Before many months had passed, Eileen and Martha worked into a steady dialogue, murmuring constantly to each other in a kind of litany, and the men left Martha alone.

It was Martha who made their decisions and defined their rhythms. She was accustomed to travel, and her energy propelled them from country to country, weaving patterns over and across the European countrysides, a tangle of connections from city to city. "How do you do it?" Eileen asked her once, on the train from Ravenna. "Just when I'm beginning to get used to a place you're looking at the map again. When do you stop?"

"When I find a place where I'm comfortable," she said, studying the guidebook.

"I don't think you've ever been comfortable in your life. How will you know?"

"Well, that's just it. I should know right off, when I get that unfamiliar feeling. Listen, Eileen — this says that the church here has the Stations of the Cross in stained glass. Let's go."

Eileen shrugged. "If you want."

Martha looked at her over the guidebook. "I always feel like I have to force you into these churches with me. Do you hate them that much?"

"Not really." Eileen smiled at her. "Catholicism just lost its charm at the part about the mortification of the flesh."

Martha was still for a moment. " 'In the end, the windows took almost 100 years to complete. Artisans passed the work down in generations, and it was considered a great gift of grace to work for the cathedral,' " she read, and looked up. "There is something attractive in all of that, you know. It's very pure."

"From a distance," said Eileen, looking out the window.

It was three years later that they came to Formentera, without any fixed plans or expectations. Martha said that she would like a few quiet weeks in the sun, and they had bought their tickets in Barcelona, taken the big boat to Ibiza and the launch from there to Formentera. "Why are you going there?" the launch driver asked them idly.

"We need a vacation," Martha told him.

"You are going to the right place," he said, flicking a cigarette into the water. In a few minutes, he started the engine, the oily gassy smell heavy in the hot air. Martha and Eileen both stared impassively out over the water, and the captain didn't say anything else to them until they had pulled far away, until Ibiza was slipping from sight. Even at full throttle, the heavy old boat couldn't go too fast, and the gassy smell was all around them. "Alone at last, eh?" he laughed, his hand firm on the rudder.

Eileen glanced at him, saw him watching Martha and smiling loosely. She moved a little closer to her, toward the edge of the launch, so that their shoulders were almost touching. He didn't say anything else until they got to the island, and didn't bother to cut the engine.

"Here is El Puerto. I come here once a day. When you want to return, wait for me here." They got out, and he heaved their backpacks up onto the landing behind them. "I will see you soon," he called as he turned the boat around and headed noisily back out to sea.

They stood on the landing for a few minutes, looking at the island. The coast curved sharply away from them; they saw a few cafes, a retaining wall of chalky white rock, and a stony hill in the distance. That was all. "Looks perfect," said Martha. It was quiet there, no

sound of radios or conversation, and the sun bore down on the dusty road and white rocks. They shrugged into their backpacks and walked just as far as the first cafe, where it was no cooler but was at least dim. The old woman who came out to them smiled ingratiatingly with a nearly hollow mouth.

"We would like some Vichy, please, and two sandwiches; do you have ham? We would like ham sandwiches," said Martha. Her Spanish was much better than the stilted shards Eileen remembered from her own high school Spanish. Martha waited until the woman returned, until after she had handed her the money, before asking where there was a hotel, a pension, a place for travelers to stay. The woman began to burble almost unintelligibly, something they understood about the east end, a town, a bus.

"What time, for the bus?" Eileen tried.

The woman looked at her, wrinkling her broad forehead.

"When does the bus go there?" asked Martha.

"Two," said the old lady. "Two. The bus goes at two o'clock." She held up two fingers.

They thanked her repeatedly, and she stood next to the table and grinned. Eileen opened the bottle and poured out water for herself and Martha, and they held up their glasses and looked at the woman. "Two."

The bus was a shuddering, hacking old trap whose windows had all been blown out or taken out. Eileen and Martha stood in the center aisle between people with baskets and livestock. Chickens were running back and forth along the aisle, chucking and pecking between feet, and the passengers stared and grinned at Eileen and Martha, nudging each other from time to time and cackling with laughter. Eileen strained to see the road through the gritty windshield while the bus rolled doggedly through potholes and shallow trenches. The landscape was baked hard. The only plants she saw, aside from a few scraggly juniper bushes, were those clustered around the occasional shacks at the side of the road, wizened pepper and tomato plants bearing tiny, petrified fruits, hard as the earth itself. Occasionally she saw plots of land that were being readied for planting, the earth furrowed into harsh ridges and crests that looked permanent, like adobe. Eileen and Martha had to stoop a little, to look out at the land. Even so, they were taller than anyone else on the bus.

They rambled the length of the island, two hours to go thirty miles. They stopped twice, to admit more passengers where there appeared to be no room, and Eileen couldn't imagine where all of these people came from, what they did, how they could live. She assumed that when they reached the town the bus would spill out all of its passengers, but when they finally did reach the short stretch of paved road and the driver began laboriously to turn the old bus around, Eileen and Martha were the only ones who made any move toward the door.

"El Pilar," he said as they edged up to him.

"I beg your pardon?" said Eileen, stopping.

"Here. This place. El Pilar."

She nodded to thank him, but he was frowning out the windshield, and Martha was already down, off the bus, looking down the street and waiting for her. She hurried down, her backpack hanging awkwardly off one shoulder. The town appeared to be this single short spurt of road lined on each side with cafes. Young people sat outside all of them in the shade of awnings, watching Eileen and Martha and the sputtering bus as it headed back down the road. The two of them stood still in the sun, gazing down the street as the noises of the bus diminished, until finally Martha picked up her backpack and they crossed the street to the closest cafe.

It seemed that all the customers there were under 30, most of them men. Eileen kept glancing at them as Martha went to order wine, but they were gazing at her openly, their faces uniformly blank. There was a common lassitude to them, even to the woman laying out Tarot cards at the table furthest from Eileen's; they sat back as if they had siphoned off their vitality, stored it or expended it somewhere else. When Martha returned to the table, one of the men she passed said, "Australian?" He didn't move.

"No, American."

"Why are you here?" He sounded comfortable enough, speaking English, but he inflected his words heavily, like an incantation.

"Vacation." Martha sat down with her back to him, but he kept talking. Eileen watched him recline in his chair.

"Strange place for an American to come on vacation."

She shrugged.

"Where will you stay?"

"Is there a pension here?" She didn't turn around.

"What, in El Pilar? There is a place where you may have the privilege of paying for a tiny room with a bad bed and cockroaches. You can do better."

"The old house by the cliff is open," said the woman with the Tarot cards without looking up. She spoke English as well. "It's not too close, but it's free."

"My friend and I want to be alone," said Martha, speaking placidly. "We have money."

"No, no one lives near that house," said the man. "You will be all alone."

"German?" Martha asked.

"No, Austrian," he said. Eileen watched him smile at Martha's back, but she didn't turn around, just looked at Eileen and asked her quietly when she wanted to go. That evening, they walked together over the long trail that he mapped out for them, passing a windmill and a handful of tiny farms. Scrub bushes gave way to pine trees, and

they passed an old woman dressed in heavy black skirts who was staking out goats. She looked up at them as they neared, but kept hammering feebly at the stake without saying anything. Martha slowed, watching her, but the woman glared back at them so they kept walking, following the dusty path until they found the harsh cement house that was wedged in between knotted old pine trees. Although the sun had been down for over two hours, the air in the house was still hot, and Eileen and Martha sat outside, fingering pine needles on the dirt, waiting for the house to cool off. Eileen thought she could hear waves slapping over smooth rock. They stayed like that, almost motionless, long after the moon began to show through the needles on the trees.

IN THE MORNING, the sun roused Eileen early, along with the sound of lizards scuttling along the cement floor. Accustomed as she was to waking up in unfamiliar surroundings, she was still disoriented whenever she opened her eyes in a new place. More than once she had awakened with a cry, jolting Martha awake too. "If you have to go over to the window to remember where you are, can't you at least do it quietly?" she yawned. "I need to keep up my sight-seeing strength." She would fall asleep again, leaving Eileen at the window watching the morning traffic, memorizing the street and people's faces.

Martha was still lying quietly with her back to her as Eileen got out of her sleeping bag and went outside the house. From the back, there was an unimpeded view of the ocean, and she picked out a path that wound down a long slope to a beach. It was still cool and a little damp outside the house, and the sky was clear and pale. It was not very different from half a dozen other places Eileen and Martha had awakened on other mornings, not very different from other remote beaches or resorts, but Eileen felt ill at ease, vaguely exposed, and kept glancing back at the house where Martha was sleeping. She wondered if the old woman with the goats had known they were staying here, if she had cared. She looked down to the ocean again, trying to determine just where the beach might be the most pleasant, and finally gave up, went back inside and sat on her sleeping bag until Martha woke up.

"Been up long?" Martha yawned, propping her head up to smile at Eileen.

"Not very. Just taking a look at the grounds."

"Palatial?"

"Ever so. They're saddling up the horses for our morning ride right now."

"Oh good. I feel cross all day I don't get to ride first thing." She lay back down, closed her eyes. "I must have been more tired than I

thought last night. I don't recall that the floor was this hard when we went to sleep." She rolled onto her stomach. "You hungry?"

"I'm getting there."

"Me too." She yawned and sat up in her sleeping bag. "And you know we didn't get any food yesterday, and there's not a morsel in this house."

"And it's two miles back to town."

"And I'd better clean up if I want anybody to let me in their store." She unzipped the sleeping bag, threw back the top flap. "All right, then. The day lies before us."

"Untrammeled vistas beckoning."

"Right. Where do you suppose we can find some water?"

"That's our first untrammeled vista."

It took them a good half-hour to find the cistern a few hundred feet away from the house, and they took turns showering each other with the cool water, shivering and sputtering in the chilly air. They promised each other than all cleaning would be done at midday after this, and ran back to the house to get dressed.

"You could use a mirror. You missed some hair on the side of your ponytail," said Eileen.

"And your part's crooked," Martha said. "Let me do it."

"What do we need in town to bring back here?"

Martha bent over her, reparting the wet hair. "Vegetables to make a stew, a little meat that can be boiled for a long time, if they've got it. Water."

"Wine," Eileen added.

"Wine. There's already a big kettle in the fireplace here, and we can just burn some of the dry bushes for cooking. Matches. Salt. Bread. Staples."

"Not many staples, if we have to carry all that back here. We're going to need a pack mule."

"We'll pick up one of those, too. Come on. I'm starving."

When they got to El Pilar that morning the young people were out in force, the same faces shaded from the early sun in the patios of the cafes, drinking coffee and wine. Eileen had the impression that they were all wearing white cotton clothing and were all watching Martha and her, but as she looked up, only a few eyes were trained on them, and she looked quickly away. Martha was walking serenely down the middle of the street, her eyes fixed on the road ahead of her. At the end, she turned and went to the cafe where they had been the day before, and sat down at a table at the street's edge. The same people were there again, they looked up as Eileen sat down and Martha went to order coffee and rolls. Eileen felt as if they had been waiting for Martha and her to return.

"You found the place, then," said the man who had drawn the map.

"We found some place, I guess it must be it," Eileen said, studying the table's blank white surface. "Little cement place in the middle of pine trees. Thank you."

He didn't say anything, just looked away, as if overcome with another wave of lassitude or boredom. When Martha emerged he nodded at her and she nodded back, curtly, before sitting down at the table with Eileen and looking out into the street. Eileen watched her, and Martha smiled at her faintly, squeezed her hand. "We'll leave after we get the food," she said. "I don't want to stay around here."

"The tragedy of Spain," the man said suddenly, looking at no one in particular, "is that it will never allow itself to become a modern nation. The army holds down the people until they revolt, and then the army crushes them again. There can be no movement here toward an industrialized, socialized economy." He spoke evenly, with complete calmness. "Spain's greatest moment came during the Inquisition."

No one said anything, and Eileen went back to studying the tabletop, embarrassed for him. After a few moments, another man spoke up, just as dispassionately, as if he were reading a script. "It is Catholicism. The people have chained themselves to the Church, and so have cut off any possibility for escape."

"No, it is not so simple as that," someone called from across the patio. "France is a Catholic country as well. But Spain holds to the Catholicism of the fourteenth century. It is a country in love with rigor. It doesn't trust ease. So it trusts the army as its government."

"It is almost as good as feudalism," added the first man.

The talk went on, washed around them. Eileen and Martha drank their coffee quietly, Martha looking out into the bright street. The others spoke lazily, flatly, moving only to signal for more to drink, talking about revolution and fate and the universal soul. Eileen watched them talking across the patio without even looking at each other. "You think this is for our benefit?" she asked Martha softly.

"No. I think it's for their own satisfaction. They probably do this every day, without ever getting out of their chairs." She drained her cup at a gulp and stood up. "Let's get the food and go home. If we wait much longer, it will be too hot."

Even then, at mid-morning, it was chokingly hot, and light glanced off the dusty road and white buildings. No one said anything as they got up from their table, and then Martha turned to the man who had drawn their map and asked him the best place to buy food.

"There," he said, nodding toward a cafe across the road, "or down there. There they have better vegetables, but at that one they make their own bread."

"All right," said Martha, already crossing the street to the place with

better vegetables, and Eileen was confused again in her wake, feeling that they should have thanked him, knowing that he would have shrugged if they had. Wondering why this was suddenly important to her, why she felt so conspicuous.

In the store, behind the requisite patio bar where young people sat looking out into the empty street, there were two narrow aisles crammed with canned foods and open bins of vegetables. There was a waxy odor of cheese in the hot, close air, and underneath it, smells of onions, tomatoes. A middle-aged woman dressed all in black was at the end of one of the aisles, assisting the woman they had passed the day before in her field. The younger woman was piling items into a basket as she was directed. The old woman wasn't purchasing a great deal, but her tiny, hunched figure appeared scarcely able to hold up the basket.

"How did she get here? I was sitting right across the street and didn't even see her come in," said Eileen.

"I did," Martha said, moving down past the cans toward the peppers and onions. "She came in while you were watching them talk about feudalism. Should we get some cheese, while we're at it?"

The proprietress looked up as they came further into the store, nodded at them and said she would help them in a moment. Martha was busily picking out vegetables from the bins, piling three tomatoes, an onion, a pepper into Eileen's hands. "We're only going to be able to buy for a day or two at a time," she said, "unless we can find some way out there to keep things cold. Where do you suppose the bread is in here?"

Eileen looked around, her hands filled with the vegetables Martha had picked out, and as she looked, the old woman approached them. "I need help, to bring these home," she said, her voice thick and deep. She spoke in Spanish, and Eileen could barely make out what she said.

"All right," Martha said immediately, easily, as if she had been waiting for this and the shopping had just been a ploy. Eileen looked up at her, frowning a little, and Martha said, "Why don't you finish up the shopping, Eileen? By the time you're finished, I'll be on my way back. It isn't far to her place. Then we can go home and see about finding a beach." She had already turned back to the old woman as she finished speaking, bent down and took the basket from her. The woman's hands were lumpy and knotted with arthritis, and there was a rosary twisted around her right wrist. She didn't thank Martha, just began to walk toward the door, moving slowly and firmly, heavy on her feet. Each step sounded clearly on the wooden floor. Eileen was still watching them when the proprietress turned politely to her and asked her, in the thick island accent, what else she might need.

Eileen finished the shopping long before Martha returned, and because there was nothing else to do, went back to the cafe with the

box the proprietress had reluctantly given her. She took the same table that she and Martha had occupied before, even though it was partially in the sun now, and drank coffee stiffly while the others talked. She was unaccustomed to sitting alone where she could be seen, and kept turning to watch for Martha. There were a few more people there, someone was fooling with a guitar, playing little runs and arpeggios that he halted partway through, the same chord progressions over and over. Eileen finished her coffee and peered anxiously again out into the street, and when she finally saw Martha, she picked up her box and went out to meet her.

"Do you want to wait here any longer? I could use a cold drink before we go back home," Martha said, smiling at Eileen and the box of food.

"I'd rather not, Martha. I feel like I've spent too much time here today already. Something about these places makes me very uncomfortable. Like I'm terribly conspicuous."

"I think these people are just used to intimidating newcomers." She took the box from Eileen and they began to stroll to the end of the paved road, beginning the walk back home. It was about 11:00, and the sun was unrelenting.

"It took you longer than I expected to walk her home. Did everything go all right?"

Despite the heat and dust and the box of groceries that seemed impossible to carry comfortably, Martha looked content. She walked with her head back, squinting into the light, and Eileen could see the skin on the back of her neck reddening. "I took a little longer than I needed to. I went out to take care of her goats for her. She's just too old to deal with them, and said something to me about being knocked down — I'm not sure whether that actually happened or she's just afraid of it. Anyway, I told her I'll take care of the goats for her from now on."

"You mean every day? Martha, we don't know how long we're going to be here." She spoke more sharply than she had meant to, and she felt foolish. "Are you sure you can make a commitment?" There had never been anything like this before, in these places where they came together as strangers.

"Well, I'll just do it for her as long as I can. She really needs somebody around to look after her all the time; she's very feeble."

Eileen thought about her scowling at them the day before from her field and today in the store. They walked quietly for a few minutes. There were lizards everywhere, tiny and greyish green, darting across the bleached ground, and the road wound and doubled on itself. Eileen kept wiping her forehead, feeling the sun blasting at the skin on her own neck.

"I liked being in her house a lot," Martha said suddenly, conversationally. "Even though it's dark inside, it was cool, and the whole

place was bare except for some religious things and this incredibly narrow bed. She said that she's a widow, but it's hard for me to imagine her having shared that bed with anyone. She has kids who are in Ibiza now. The only light I saw when we came in was this one candle she had lit under a picture of the crucifixion, but she said she didn't need much light. She had a spinning wheel, too." Martha smiled contentedly, looking ahead, down the road, not at Eileen.

"Can I come with you some time? I'd like to see this."

"I don't know, Eileen. I'll have to ask her if she'd mind. I don't think she'd be too happy with it. She doesn't seem too happy with me being there in the first place."

By the time they got back to the house — it still cool in the early afternoon — they were both badly sunburned, and Eileen added baking soda to the shopping list for the next day, wondering how she could say that in Spanish. For the afternoon, she and Martha dipped scarves in water from the cistern and wrapped them around their throats, chopped the vegetables and the meat and built a small fire to begin a stew for dinner. They were quiet, moving in concert from long experience, and when the house got too hot to stay indoors, they went outside to sit under the pine trees. They both had books, but when Eileen looked up, Martha was just sitting quietly, watching the ants clambering over pine needles on the dirt.

In the morning they got up early, and walked together as far as the Señora's house. Eileen went into the town, had coffee and did the shopping, and waited there for Martha. No one said anything to her as she waited, and by the time Martha came it was too hot to walk home again, so they stayed in the cafe until late afternoon, when it was still hot but the sun had lost its potency. All day the talk of the others flowed around them, but Eileen and Martha said very little, and only to each other. They went home and made supper, talked quietly, and Eileen didn't ask about the Señora. There was nothing she knew to ask, nothing she knew to do except watch Martha and try to hold her with the same ease they had had at the beginning. But since they had come to Formentera, nothing had seemed easy to her.

And then slowly, reluctantly, Eileen began to talk with the others at the cafe as she waited for Martha to come back. No one seemed surprised that she began to talk, that she argued a little too loudly, that first time, that there had to be some common morality to keep the world from chaos and disintegration.

"Wouldn't one person's morality be enough to keep things in their order?" asked a woman.

"Who has said there must be an order, or that there is any order now?" asked someone else. None of them smiled. They were too serious, or too tired, and Eileen had to stop herself from crying out that there was an order, that there had to be, because surely all people needed some order. They sat watching her cooly and she was close to

tears, but when she asked Martha on their walk home, Martha just said, "Of course there's a common morality," as though it were plain, obvious.

"What is it, then?" she asked.

Martha smiled at her indulgently. "You've been staying at the cafe too much, Eileen."

"That may be true. But I need to do something while you're with the Señora." She glanced at her, but Martha didn't respond. "The problem with those people is that their talk doesn't get them anywhere."

"The problem with those people," Martha said, "is that they think they're moral if they talk about morality, or they're revolutionary if they mention revolution. It's ridiculous."

"What else can people do?"

"*Do* the things they talk about," said Martha, and her voice was acid with contempt. "Live the way they say they believe."

"What if that hinges on other people?"

"Then they're living wrong," Martha snapped. "I can't stand those people." Eileen concentrated on walking softly, trying not even to disturb the dust on the road. There had been a time in Rome that she and Martha had gotten separated, when they had planned to catch a bus out of the city for a day. Eileen didn't speak any Italian, she couldn't get there without Martha, so she stayed in the square for two hours, until Martha found her.

"I was afraid you were already there, waiting for me," Eileen had said.

"I wouldn't go without being sure of you," Martha had said, and squeezed Eileen's hand. She walked ahead of Eileen now, solid and purposeful.

MARTHA BEGAN TO SPEND MORE TIME with the Señora; she was learning to spin. "She trusts me more than she used to," Martha said one night as they sat outside. "She talks to me some, even though it's getting harder for her to talk. She misses her children, but they had to go away to make some money. You can see that there's no money to be made here. But Eileen, she's teaching me about the old ways, how to live on the land even when the land's as hard as this." She talked happily and quickly, as if there were no questions about the things she was learning. "You know, people are religious here because they have to be. It isn't that their religion's a crutch; it's something that helps give them the strength to pull through. And she's a strong woman. She isn't worried about dying, because she's sure that God will come and transfigure her. She's looking forward to it, and the only thing she's really worried about is that she'll die alone. She needs to make sure that someone is there, she says, as

witness."

Eileen hesitated. "Are you going to do that for her?"

"I hope so. I don't tell her that, because I'm not sure it's me she wants, but I do want to bear witness for her. She's a good woman. She's had a hard, strong life. She needs a witness."

Eileen looked at her until she couldn't bear it anymore, then closed her eyes.

It was a few days later, at the cafe, that someone said the Catholicism of Spain was different from that of any other place. "It's harder here," she said. "Fiercer. People are unyielding. Typically Spanish, to use religion to measure strength. The whole nation is measuring itself against its own God."

"But that's the beauty of religion here," said Martha later. "It's strong, and triumphant. It's taking your own measure, not just supplicating all the time. Every person is engaged in a personal battle. The people who live here, like the Señora, know more about real strength than any group I've ever seen."

She was spending long days with the Señora. She and Eileen left the house together in the mornings — now, as the year waned, the sky still dark as they set out — and she joined her at home again at night, after she had seen the Señora to bed. "I'm beginning to feel like her companion," Martha laughed, sitting across the room from Eileen with her knees drawn up to her chest, the only light the dying fire underneath their big cooking pot. "I go everywhere with her, go to Mass in the mornings and put her to bed at night."

"I didn't know you were going to Mass."

"I didn't like her walking long distances by herself — especially back from the church in the sun. Besides, I like going to Mass with her. These people really do seem holy to me, Eileen. These hard lives are *good*." Eileen didn't have to look at her to know that her face was glowing, taking on a hard sheen, like an insect's shell.

As Martha began to spend all of her time with the Señora, Eileen began to spend more time alone, at the house, away from the people in El Pilar. The days were becoming shorter and cooler in slow increments, a very gradual easing from the blazing summer days — still too hot at noon to walk outside, but a cooling at the edges. She walked around the rocky cliff where their house was, picked her way down the path from the house to the beach and found old caves made of the same chalky white rock that was all around the island, and the crumbling remains of an old pier. The first day she went down to the beach, the tide came in while she was exploring one of the caves and washed up her legs, dirty water that stank of dead fish, wrapping decayed seaweed around her ankles and knees. She stood there, her head bent down against the roof of the cave for several hours, until the water finally began to wash sluggishly back out, as if it were reluctant to leave. She picked her trembling way back up to the house and

scrubbed herself with bucket after bucket of cistern water until she was sure that the sea water had been washed away. When she went again, she stayed away from the caves.

Three days after that the weather suddenly turned hot again. The heat began at dawn and built swiftly; by 8:00 Eileen felt immobilized, struck down. There was no cool time to make the long walk to El Pilar, no way to store food at the house, so Eileen staggered into town and stayed there, sleeping as the others did in the expensive pension, staying all day in the shaded patios, too depleted to talk. It was then, in the grip of weather too hot for anyone to function, that the Señora began to die. Eileen went to the house and Martha came to the door, her hair straggling down onto her shoulders, her face harsh from fatigue.

"There's nothing you can do," she said calmly to Eileen. "I've got everything under control here. We don't need food; I can eat from the garden and she can't keep anything down now but a little goat's milk. Just send the priest, if you would. We need him here now."

The heat shuddered down, a physical presence that Eileen fought her way through to get to the priest, who looked ill himself in his black cassock. "I will go there in the evening," he told Eileen. "Is she so bad that she cannot last to this evening?" Eileen shrugged; she had no idea. Martha had stood in the doorway so that she could not see into the house. "I will go there after this sun goes down."

So Eileen stayed in town again that day, staring down at the table or the ground because it was too bright to look into the street. She couldn't think about the Señora, or about Martha; as she tried to recollect Martha's face, masklike from exhaustion, it slipped away from her, and she found herself thinking instead about Paris. They had stayed there a long time, one whole winter, and it had rained almost every day. Once they had been caught inside Notre Dame while vespers were being sung, while lightning had illuminated the rose windows. Eileen didn't know how long she had been wanting to leave Formentera.

She sat as they all did, dazed by the heat, and after the sun went down she saw the priest walking down the street, carrying a small satchel. Eileen knew that she couldn't rely on her own sense of time, beaten down and worn out as she was, but it seemed too soon that he returned, his heavy black shoes kicking up dust at every step, his cassock hem white with it. "Your friend would not let me in; she told me it is not time," he called to her from the street. "She said that she will come to get me, when it is time." She watched him as he made his way down the street to the rectory at the end, dust following him like a tangible shadow. She sat there until the proprietor came to tell her that it was time for her to leave, and then dully went to her room in the pension. Even the night air was debilitating, and the sky looked murky, the stars obscured.

She went to the Señora's house the next day, but Martha wouldn't

open the door to her. "We're fine," she said. "We don't need anything. If we need anything, I'll come get you." Her voice sounded strained, but so did everyone's in that air, fetid like the backwash of some nasty tide.

She didn't go back for three days. The heat stayed with them, even the fat flies were slow and logy, and she didn't hear anything. The town was very quiet; it took more energy to talk than it was ever worth, and the old bus whose rattling arrival they had depended on every day stopped coming. Eileen didn't know whether it had broken down or the driver just didn't think it was worth it to come to El Pilar. On the third day, Eileen went back to the Señora's house, half blinded by the light.

Martha didn't answer her knocking. Eileen couldn't hear anything from inside the house, and so she opened the old door and looked in. "Martha?" The room was dim, it looked as black as a cave after Eileen's walk in the sunlight, and it took several moments for her to be able to see anything inside. "Martha?" she asked, and gagged as she walked in against a stench as solid as a wall.

Martha was sitting on the stone floor, hugging her knees up tight against her chest, rocking herself. She didn't look up as Eileen came in and called to her. She was mumbling something over and over, barely moving her lips. Her hair lay tangled and wild over her shoulders, and there were brown streaks across her face. She mumbled and rocked and paid no attention at all to Eileen as she fought her way through the odor and knelt down to her. "Martha. It's Eileen. I'm here. What do you need, Martha? Are you all right?"

For a moment, there was no response, and Eileen put her hands on Martha's shoulders, tried to still her. Finally, Martha's eyes focused, she stopped mumbling and rocking and looked at Eileen. The door was open behind her, throwing a block of light into the room. Martha stared at Eileen for a moment, and then began to cry, simply and suddenly, without saying a word. Eileen tried to hold her, but Martha sat tight and clenched on the floor, and Eileen finally stood up to look around her.

There was very little in the room. Two illustrations of the crucifixion, one with a votive bracket underneath where a candle had burned out. One straight chair, a small table with a stained rag thrown across it, and the bed, where the Señora lay. That was all. Even from where she stood, Eileen could see that she was dead, lying naked on the bed, streaked with dried blood that lay crusted on the bedclothes, blood that looked like it must have poured out of her. It was everywhere, in trails and pools, as if she had tried to thrash or run, at the end. The smell came in waves, overpowering. From where she stood, there was something she couldn't see well and didn't understand, and so Eileen began to breathe shallowly through her mouth and move closer to the bed, Martha steadily crying behind

her.

All around the Señora, on the bed and across her groin, maggots were swarming. Smeared with her blood, they wriggled across the bed and over her body, pale as cave creatures, uncountable. They washed from her groin and crawled to her face. Legions of them writhing over each other, covering her old breasts and stomach in a solid, teeming sheet, and Eileen threw back her head then and screamed, while Martha sobbed dully behind her.

In the end, the screaming brought others, even in that heat, and they looked at the room and Martha and understood. They buried the Señora quickly, that night, the priest reading the short version of the burial service. Martha and Eileen were in the pension, sitting together silently, but the woman in the store told Eileen the next day that they had had to pour acid on the body to kill the maggots, and the body had broken in half as they tried to slip it into the grave. Eileen didn't tell Martha, and the next day Martha went back to the house, shutting the door on Eileen and everyone else. She stayed there for a week, until the heat finally broke and the rain began, and when she came into the town, her hair was drawn tightly back away from her face, in the style of the women of Formentera.

"Are you ready to come back to the house now?" Eileen asked her.

"No. I'm going to stay in the Señora's house now. There is a lot to look after there, the goats and the garden."

Eileen looked at her. Her face looked sharper with her hair pulled back so severely, and Eileen felt very tired. "Martha, it's time for us to leave. I don't want to stay here any more."

"I'm not going to leave." Martha was looking down at her hands, and Eileen looked at them too — slender and pale, even after months of working in the sun. "I'm going to stay here." She said it softly, as if she were trying out the words. Tasting them.

Eileen kept looking at Martha's hands. When Eileen had gotten sick in Glasgow, Martha had stayed up with her, night after night, holding her hand and talking to her. "When I got you to laugh," she had said, "I knew you were all right."

"Martha, it isn't your place to stay here. *This* isn't your place."

"It is, though. It is now. I feel comfortable here. God is here." She said it firmly, but without defiance, like any simple truth.

Eileen looked at her, tried to force Martha to meet her eyes. Her hands were clenched, clutching at the air. "God doesn't exist only here, Martha. He isn't only on a tiny island in Spain." Her voice was getting louder, strident, and Martha was still looking down. "Is that what you believe? Even the priests here couldn't have told you that. If God's worth anything, he's everywhere. Martha, *listen* to me." She could afford to scream, to do anything, with Martha looking down so calmly. "You're worshipping some idol, or a lifestyle. Look around

you — even the people here don't want us to stay. This isn't our place. If you've found God, that's wonderful. But if you can only be religious here, you haven't found anything."

"This is where He wants me to stay."

"How can you say that? How can you believe that? I can't believe you have to stay here because God won't let you be anywhere else."

"Eileen—" Martha looked up at her, her face open now, mobile. "Do you remember when I talked to you about witnessing? About witnessing for the Senora?"

"Yes. You have done that, Martha."

"No, I haven't. Watching her die — anyone could have done that. It's this that is witnessing for her, staying here. Carrying on her life, because it's good and strong and holy."

"It isn't *yours*, Martha. You're throwing yourself away. And you're trying to take on something that doesn't belong to you. You can't just buy in like this."

"Eileen, I'm sorry. Please stop arguing."

Eileen stood there then, quietly, while Martha turned around and left. There was nothing to do, after that, but leave. Nothing that could be done.

It took only a day, to go back to the house and pack her belongings. She brought Martha's things, her backpack and clothes and books, and Martha thanked her. They stood awkwardly for a moment, Eileen with her backpack already on, Martha wearing a long skirt, her hands filled with vegetables from the garden.

"Good luck," Martha said.

"Thank you."

"I hope things go well for you. What will you do?"

"Go home."

"Then?"

"I don't know." She was looking at the ground, softened now from recent rain. "Will you marry here, have children?"

"No. I would rather live alone."

Who will bear witness for you? Eileen wanted to ask. She walked past the cafes, and the people watched her go. She called out a goodbye to them, and one of the men smiled at her. She stood at the edge of the road until the bus came to take her away.

Evicted

JOANNE ZIMMERMAN

PHILLIE ALWAYS HAS SUNDAY DINNER at his mother's. Marcia works all week as assistant buyer of draperies and upholstery fabric at a department store. Saturday she does marketing and errands, and cleans her small apartment. She would like to relax and not to cook every Sunday, but this is her maternal gesture toward Phillie: she cannot house him, but she can feed him. She cooks much more than they will eat, and sends meat, vegetables, fruit and dessert home with him to sustain him during the week. This was her idea. Phillie doesn't make demands on her.

Marcia loves Phillie, although she finds him exasperating sometimes. She loves his gentle, not-quite-focussed quality, which, she suspects, covers strong feelings. She doesn't want to deal with the strong feelings, so she is grateful to Phillie for pushing them out of sight. "I had enough," she says. "All problems go on the back burner."

Everyone says that Phillie looks like her, and she is glad of that, glad that he does not resemble his father Charlie. She wouldn't want to cook a good dinner, put her arms around and welcome a replica of Charlie every Sunday.

They may resemble each other, but she considers herself much tougher than he will ever be, with a determination that comes of fighting with Charlie over every detail during the time Phil was growing up. Marcia feels guilty about that warfare. She knows that Phillie's recollections of childhood include not only his big brown dog, participation in Little League, and vacations in Michigan, but also screams, tears, shouted exchanges, nightmares, slammed doors, and a sometimes absent father.

If he could not escape these outbursts of rage, Phil was able to focus elsewhere and thus absent himself. He didn't say much then, but Marcia thinks that now she sees the response he would have liked to make, on his lips, in his eyes, in the crook of a smile that will not broaden freely. She thinks that some day they will have a heart-to-heart, and have it all out.

When Phil went to college, Marcia and Charlie finally got a divorce. They had to sell their home to make a settlement, and she took a small apartment. So when Phil came home at vacations, and then after graduation, he stayed with Marcia's father Earl. This was to be tem-

porary until Phil found an apartment, but is has stretched to a three-year tenancy. Earl loved having Phillie there at the outset, and Phillie doesn't seem to exert himself to look for anything bigger. He found a job in a bank. He does his own cooking in the one-room basement apartment in his grandfather's house. Marcia feels he should have a home-cooked, mother-cooked meal once a week, and the Sunday ritual evolved, even though Marcia doesn't always find it convenient, and suspects that Phillie's attendance is occasionally reluctant.

Phil is five feet eight inches tall, and he is beginning to get a ring of flab around his waist that stretches the fabric of his fitted shirts. Marcia stopped baking cakes for their dessert, and serves fruit instead. Phil has blue eyes that tend to go slightly out of focus when he is tired, or not paying attention, which gives him a dreamy expression. He has round cheeks, a full lower lip, a pleasant face. Marcia could see what the bank manager saw in him—a bland, rather engaging person. She can imagine that any more weight added would accentuate the pouty little-boy look by rounding his cheeks and doubling his chin. She said, "You ought to get more exercise, Phillie."

"I'm going to, Mom. I'm going to."

"Get out more. Get some exercise. See some friends."

"I'm all right, Mom," he grinned.

Marcia thinks about that basement room where Phillie lives. She and her brother and sister called it the "wreck" room when they were youngsters at home. "If my mother were alive . . . " Marcia sighed.

These days she prefaces a lot of remarks with, "If my mother were alive . . . " Phil would have one of the bedrooms upstairs, and be getting good food and loving care. But her mother had died. A year and a half before her death, Mrs. Dorson was hired as housekeeper. Marcia hates her. Mrs. Dorson came to the family on their minister's recommendation, although she never goes to church. Marcia decided that this was his way to save a lost soul, and she bitterly resents being called upon to participate in the salvation.

Mrs. Dorson is Marcia's own age—forty five. She has blond hair stiffly upswept, always the same. It looks like a wig, but it probably isn't. Marcia would like to pull it to see. Mrs. Dorson is a buxom woman with a small disapproving mouth, deepset black eyes, and black eyebrows. She has had a varied career which included waiting on tables, working in a mattress factory, being a go-go dancer. Evidently she has decided on a new career, because when Marcia's mother died, she simply stayed on, and there she is, ruling the household and Marcia's father, having the furniture re-done, taking away her mother's aura and substituting her own bad taste, her own perfume in the air.

Earl will not discuss the situation, except when Marcia asked, "Are you paying her?" He exploded with anger and shouted, "Of course I'm

paying her. She's my housekeeper, isn't she?"

For over a year of Sundays Phillie brought his girlfriend Debby with him for dinner, but for the past two months he has come alone. Marcia likes Debby well enough, but she doesn't think she is smart enough for Phil. He is twenty-four. Debby is eighteen, just graduating from high school. Marcia asked her where she is planning to go to college, but Debby said, "Oh, I don't know. I'm not planning on college."

Marcia said, "There's a college for everyone."

Debby glanced at Phil from under her long lashes. "I've had enough of books for a while. I want to get a job. Get my own apartment. I want to have some fun for a change." She is as tall as Phil, with a turned-up nose and long shiny brown hair. She has the squeaky voice of a squeezed doll.

If Phil arrives early for dinner, he watches television until the food is ready, and the set stays on while they eat. One Sunday, over ham and sweet potatoes, they watched jittery pictures of dead and wounded in Beirut, a beer commercial, and a report from Paris on a bomb that blew up the bomb disposal expert who was dismantling it. Phil seemed less present than usual.

Marcia asked, "I could turn that off. Should I turn that off?"

"No. I don't care. Whatever you want."

Silence followed. Marcia remembered that dinner was livelier when Debby attended, too, and she asked, "Aren't you seeing Debby any more, Phil?"

"Not much."

"What's the trouble?"

Phil shrugged, looked out the window at something interesting in the far distance. "She just takes too much *do*ing, that's all. I get tired of it."

Marcia nodded sagely, satisfied with a reasonable explanation. "I know just what you mean." Debby was smooth-skinned and insouciant, but she couldn't imagine listening to that squeaky doll's voice for very long. A few hours on Sunday was plenty for her. She said, "Frankly, Phil, I think you need someone more mature, more your contemporary; someone who has finished college already, and has started on her career. There must be dozens of attractive young women at the bank, aren't there?"

"I suppose so. I get tired of *them*, too. They're all so high-powered, uptight." He looked directly at her, and then away. *Like me*, she thought grimly. "They're so determined not to take any shit from anybody. You can't tell them anything without a fight. Every teller thinks she knows best. And, Christ! If you point out a mistake to them! They're ready to make it a federal case! I hate the arguments."

"See," Marcia said judiciously, "the trouble is that the management is all men and the tellers are all women. That puts everything on

another basis. No wonder they're all mad at you."

"But what did I do. *I* didn't do anything to them!" Phil leaned back, his hands out, palms up. He looked almost ready to cry. Marcia noted that his fingernails were dirty, that his hair was stringy, oily, and definitely thinning at the temples. He said, "They're welcome to *my* job, for one."

"Really, Phil? You don't mean that. I think you're in line for a promotion. I can just see you in that nice corner office where Mr. Hartley sits, behind that big desk. You wouldn't mind that, would you, Phillie?"

"Mom! Do you know what Mr. Hartley does when people come in to that office to talk to him? He sits there picking his nose while he talks to you. You ask him a question, and you get this disgusting performance."

Marcia could hardly speak for laughing. She finally could ask, "Do you at least get the information?"

"You get the information. It's disgusting. I don't go in there any more." Phil looked surprised at her merriment, but finally he smiled. He bent his his head over his plate full of ham, potatoes, and broccoli, and swallowed hard and swallowed again, his Adam's apple moving briskly.

Marcia took a deep breath, wiped her eyes. "Well," she said, "anyhow, that will be your job someday, I'm sure."

"What? Nose-picking?"

"No, silly! Be serious. Mr. Hartley's job. You'll be good at it."

On television they saw a jeep bristling with guns, full of soldiers in Belfast, their young faces white and drawn. And then the face of the President filled the screen like a withered ruddy apple, smiling a lopsided smile, spouting homilies. Phil said, "I'm not going to be there forever. Maybe not much longer."

Marcia responded by jumping up to clear a few plates off the table. She stood, holding them, and said, "You can make that a self-fulfilling prophecy, Phil, but you really shouldn't. Please don't. What would you live on? Who would support you? Who would take care of you?" Then she carried the plates to the kitchen, returned with coffee and fruit compote, resuming her speech before she sat again. "I want you to be sensible, Phillie. Straighten yourself out. Find a new girl friend, if it isn't Debby . . . "

"Debby's all right. I'm just not in the mood."

"Take up a hobby. What about photography? You used to be so good at photography."

"My camera was ripped off."

"Well, then, buy another one. Tell Charlie to buy you one. Try something else." It occurred to her that some presentiment of aging was causing the gloomy mood. "You're only twenty-four, Philip. You've got a long way to go," she said softly.

"That's what worries me." His eyes focussed on the plane in back of the television, on the other side of the wall perhaps. He finished his dessert, pushed back from the table, and brought his gaze back to Marcia. "You know what I'd *like* to do, Mom? I'd like to go back to Mexico."

"Mexico!"

"Yes. I liked it there a lot."

"Are you talking about a vacation? Are you due for a vacation?"

"No. I mean, *go* there. Live there."

"Live there! On what? You can't be serious, Phillie."

"I don't know. I liked it there. I liked it a lot." His right eye, the weak one, wandered slightly, off on its own. Marcia thought that he could see two visions that way, that he was present in her dining room, eating dinner, and also seeing palm trees, purple mountains, ocean waves, strange cities. It made her nervous. "If there's a war, that's a better place to be," he said.

"A war! You don't think there's going to be a war!"

"Who knows?" focussed in the distance, free of conflict and anger.

"That's a cop-out, Phillie," she said firmly. "That's not being realistic. After all, that was just for a summer when you were in school. When you didn't have any responsibilities, not even for yourself, with your teachers and guide and all. You can't do that now." She was talking louder than she intended, and could not keep a harsh note from her voice, of strain, of frustration. "That's not being very mature. You couldn't expect them to hold your job for you, for whenever you chose to come back and ask for it."

"I hate that job," he said, intensely serious for once. "I should have gone into something else. I thought banking meant money, finance, not people. Charlie made it sound so great. It means little diddly-shit all day long."

Marcia said wearily, "Oh, Phillie, it's a *good* job. You don't know. A lot of people are looking for jobs like that these days. What else would you do? You don't have any training or experience." She stared at him, but he did not return her glance, slipping away again to revery. He pushed a few crumbs around on the table cloth, his expression blank. Marcia wanted to shake him. "Well," she said, "that's enough of that. We won't talk about it any more." With great effort to sound cheerful she said, "Why don't you call Debby? Bring Debby with you next Sunday."

"I'm O.K., Mom," he said pleasantly. "Don't worry." In silence they watched a young woman shampoo her hair. "I'll call Debby. I'm going to keep my job." For a second Marcia suspected that this had been a charade to frighten her, but she did not think Phil was that devious. He continued, "I'm going to look for another apartment, too. I'd like to

get out of there. I think that's part of what's getting me down."

"Oh! Earl would be so hurt if you moved! He loves having you there."

"Is that what he says to you?"

"Well, he used to."

Phil nodded. "He's a pain in the ass. He thinks he can tell me what to do all the time. If I come in a little late, if I don't do things just the way he says—just the way they've always been done—he gets on my case."

"You have to remember he's getting older. He's set in his ways."

"If it were just Grandpa. But that stupid bitch. *She* screams at *him* and *he* dumps on *me*. She screams at him all the time and he doesn't say a word to her. I can't stand to hear screaming. I don't go upstairs any more."

Marcia ran her hand through her hair. "God! I wish he'd get rid of her!"

"Not a chance. Grandpa's fucking her. You know that, don't you?" he asked gloomily.

Marcia held her hand before her face, as though to ward off a blow. "I can't do a thing about it, Phil. At least he hasn't married her. I think he'll have that much consideration for me and the rest of the family."

"I wouldn't count on it." A promising starlet, with a plastic smile and hair like whipped meringue, was being interviewed on the television.

"But at least, since you *are* living there, Phillie, pay your rent. Why don't you pay your rent?"

"He told you."

"Yes. He said you haven't paid your rent for months. If it's a question of the money . . . "

"No."

"What then?"

"I forgot. I just didn't feel like it."

"I didn't believe it was a question of the money. You don't seem to be extravagant, god knows. You earn more than I do, and I've been working for fifteen years!"

"I don't feel like it. I don't think it's worth it. I don't think anything is worth it." His lower lip thrust, he was his childhood self, hurting, stubbornly refuting, losing an argument. It made Marcia want to cry. It frightened her.

"I'll talk to Earl about it," she said. "Maybe we can fix up that room a little."

ON A SUNDAY IN JUNE Marcia was baking two chickens, cooking potatoes, green beans, slicing fruit for compote, when Earl

telephoned. She had to hold the receiver several inches from her ear. "I just evicted your son!" he bellowed. "I evicted my own grandson. I never thought such a thing would happen in my life! My own grandson! I thought it would be nice to have him here, but . . . "

"Calm down, Dad," Marcia said wearily. "What happened?"

"I told him he had to pay his rent or get out. He's three months in arrears, Marcia. And he just looked at me and walked out the back door without saying a word. That's all."

"Well, when he comes here for dinner, I'll . . . "

"He isn't going to come there for dinner, Marcia. He's in shorts and a torn shirt. He looks like a bum. He doesn't have any money. His wallet is downstairs. And that's another thing. I want you to see his room. It's filthy. A pig-pen. It's a wonder we don't have cockroaches or mice. Maybe we have. He's a spoiled brat, your Phillie. He's nothing but a brat."

Marcia thought she could hear Mrs. Dorson's coaching in this speech. She tried to sound calm. "He hasn't *called* me, so I expect him for dinner. I'll talk to him then, Dad. Don't worry."

"I'm not worried. Where do you think he could go?" he asked anxiously. "In shorts and a tee-shirt and no bus fare. His wallet is in his room. I want you to come over right now, Marcia."

An hour later Marcia let herself into her parents' house with the key she had been allowed to carry since adolescence. Coming into this house warped time, and she was stirred with youthful uncertainties. "Hello?" she called. Earl got up slowly from a chair in the living room. Marcia put her cheek forward for a kiss. "I brought you the paper."

"I've got a paper. Who wants to read it anyhow? Wars, murders. Garbage, that's all there is in it." He looked tired. His white hair was cut short, his shirt and trousers clean and sharply pressed, his shoes shined. Marcia thought, *She's keeping him well, but she's wearing him out.* "Sit down, Marcia," Earl said.

"Why don't we go down to the wreck room? Maybe we'll find something there . . . some reason for . . . "

"No. I want to talk to you first."

"You already told me," she sighed, and sat obediently on the couch. Mrs. Dorson had covered it with plastic which stuck to the back of her knees.

"He's a spoiled brat, your Phillie," Earl began.

"Look, Dad," Marcia interrupted. Then she stood, went to the foot of the stairs and called up, "Mrs. Dorson? Come on down. You might as well be in on this. You'll hear it all more clearly down here."

Mrs. Dorson came down slowly from the head of the stairs where she had stood eavesdropping, bearing her large bosom aggressively before her, her blond slicked-up hair unruffled. "How are you, honey?" she said sweetly.

Marcia sat again, slumped against the pillow Mrs. Dorson had covered with lace. Earl said, "Sit up straight, Marcia." Then he continued, " . . . a spoiled brat. I thought it would be nice to have him here. My grandson. I'm giving him a bargain, to let him rent that apartment for . . . "

"That *room*," Marcia corrected.

"It has a kitchen and a bathroom, hasn't it? That's an apartment. For seventy-five dollars a month. I could get twice that much from a stranger and not have the aggravation. Seventy-five dollars," he said in an aggrieved voice. "That's peanuts."

"Not that we need the money," Mrs. Dorson chimed in. Marcia gave her a furious look, which she ignored.

Earl said, "I'm doing him a favor. *You* couldn't keep him. I thought it would be nice." The accusation was not explicit, but it was there, that Marcia had neglected her responsibility to Phil, that she had not behaved properly. She was once again the little girl, unjustly accused, being scolded for something she did not do. The consequence was to listen to this harangue, not for the first time.

Marcia said angrily, "We're not talking about *me*, are we? Not this time."

Earl leaned toward her, pounded his fist on his knee. He said, "I never got anything I didn't pay for. I worked hard, and I paid my own way. I expect the same from my grandson. Why, when I was his age I had a wife and three children to support, and I had been working for seven years straight without a vacation!"

"It's a different world now."

"Nowadays they think if they don't get a month off . . . "

Marcia thought she had allowed him as much time as necessary to air his grievances. "Tell me what he said. What did Phillie say?"

"He knew he was doing wrong. The last few months he's been hiding from me. Didn't want to see me. Didn't want to talk to me. Sneaks in here the back way, doesn't even say good evening, and goes down into his hole in the ground. Wait till you see the way he's been living. Filthy. Living like a pig. You haven't seen it. You don't take good care of him. It's a wonder we don't have cockroaches. Mice. Rats."

"Philip is twenty-four years old. I'm certainly not going to come and clean house for him. That's not what you're suggesting, is it? I've got my hands full with my own life. Working full time. Trying to keep my own obligations."

"Lives like a pig. I won't let Mrs. Dorson go down there."

"I wouldn't want Mrs. Dorson to touch a thing," Marcia said directly to her. Mrs. Dorson's pinched little mouth smiled slightly.

"You look at his room. I won't let Mrs. Dorson go down there. I don't go down there myself. I had to wait for him in the kitchen, to catch him when he sneaked in. Didn't come in the front door like a gentleman

and say good evening."

Marcia wondered how many times Phillie had listened to the same speech. "What did he say?" she asked, hopeful that they might get to the issue at last.

"When?"

"When you talked to him in the kitchen this afternoon."

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"I reminded him that he was three months in arrears with his rent. I told him he had to pay his rent or get out." He glanced at Mrs. Dorson. "And he just looked at me and walked out the back door without saying a word. That's all."

Marcia heard the pain of rejection in his voice; he was caught between Mrs. Dorson's nagging and his own inclination to indulge his grandson. "It isn't the money, Marcia," he continued. "It's the principle of the thing."

After a pause Marcia said gently, "Well, let's go down," and led the way through the dining room and kitchen to the basement stairs, and down.

At the landing she could already smell it—the musty basement smell, plus the stench of long-unwashed clothing and garbage rotting. "My god!" Marcia stood in the center of the mess and looked around.

The floor was strewn with socks, underwear, shirts. Food encrusted dishes filled the small sink, and the garbage pail overflowed with pizza cardboards, pop cans, coffee grounds, containers from Colonel Sanders and Burger King. The fruit, the wholesome meat dishes and vegetables she had sent home with him over the past few Sundays moldered in the refrigerator. There were glasses, papers and magazines piled on the counter and end tables; junk mail and solicitations from political parties, the Nuclear Freeze Committee, SANE, CARE, Amnesty International, Save the Whale, Rescue Children, Sierra Club, and others lay unopened on the desk. The couch was spread out as a bed, the grey rumpled sheets damp and oily to the touch.

"You see?" Earl said in a husky voice. "I didn't know what to do."

"Why didn't you tell me before now?" Tears blurred Marcia's vision momentarily. She stared around the home—no, the temporary stop, the stopping place—of someone who has given up, who hasn't treated himself well or made himself comfortable in this world, hasn't opened the windows and aired the room because perhaps he felt the air was filthy, too, and the night sky was dangerous. There were no notes or clues.

Marcia telephoned Charlie. A woman answered. When Charlie picked up the receiver he said, "That's my neighbor. She and her hus-

band just stopped in."

Marcia laughed. "Look Charlie. We're divorced, remember? I don't care who she is."

"My neighbor," he said stubbornly, with an alibi reflex.

"Is Phillie with you?"

"No. Phillie? Did he say he was coming here?"

"He left Earl's, and we don't know where he is. He left an awful mess here.

"The last time I talked to him he said he was thinking of moving some place else."

"Really?"

"Yes. He said he was getting tired of going *down* every time he came home. That it was getting him down to go down."

"He didn't tell *me* that."

"Well, that's what he told *me*. Maybe he's with his girlfriend, what's-her-name. Maybe he's on a binge."

Marcia shook her head. "I'll try Debby."

"Marcia, you think he's coming here?" She heard his anxiety, and almost could see the woman at his side listening, her eyes on him, trying to make sense of the conversation.

"I don't know what he's doing. If he comes to you, Charles, you'll let me know, won't you? I'm at Earl's now."

"Of course. I'll let you know. But it wouldn't be very convenient right now."

"Jesus, Charlie! I'm not asking you to *do* anything, nothing at all!"

Debby hadn't seen Phillie for weeks. "I was busy with graduation and all," she said.

"Graduation? Oh, yes. Congratulations, Debby."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hazelton." Debby added, with real hurt in her voice, "I haven't seen Phillie, and I'm not sure I'm going to."

"Oh?"

"He wouldn't come to my prom with me. I invited him, but he said he was too old. I said if he's too old for my prom maybe he's too old for *me*, and that's the last time I saw him."

"Oh, Debby, he'll be back." Under other circumstances, Marcia would have been glad if Phil had broken off with Debby. Now she felt guilty for her disloyal preference, reassured herself at the same time she comforted Debby.

Mrs. Dorson said, "I'm going upstairs. It stinks down here."

Marcia said to Earl, "You go along upstairs, too, Dad."

"Where do you think he might be, Marcia?"

"I don't know. I'm not going to start worrying until midnight. So that gives us four hours. Go along."

Marcia looked for a place to sit down, but there was not a chair that was not festooned with clothing or piled with newspapers and

magazines. She began picking up a few things. Then she went upstairs and got a plastic bag, stripped the couch-bed and put the oily sheets and the dirty clothes in the bag. She emptied the rotting contents of the refrigerator into another bag, and carried it and the garbage outside to the alley. Earl heard her, came to the head of the basement stairs and called out in a voice of tenderness, welcome, "Is that you, Phillie?"

"No. It's I. Marcia. I'm cleaning up down here."

"Do you want some help?"

"No. Thanks, Dad. Maybe you should go to bed. You look tired."

"Did you hear from Phillie?"

"No. But I thought I'd clean up a little so when he gets back . . . "

"That's all right."

When she had picked up papers and magazines, and washed and put away dishes and glasses, the room looked as it had since her and her brother and sister's adolescence. Their high school textbooks and her brother's baseball trophies were still on the shelves, their prom pictures on the walls, their phonograph records in the cabinet. It was as though Philip had not been there at all. He had absented himself completely. Or they had never given him place.

Marcia dusted furniture, mopped the floor and tried not to watch the clock. She decided to rest for a moment, have a cup of coffee.

She took out the coffee pot she had just washed, opened the tin of coffee. It was full of bills—tens, twenties, fifties, crumpled, rolled up, crammed in. Her first thought was "rent money." She smoothed out a few bills thoughtfully, and decided not to give Mrs. Dorson the satisfaction of paying up the arrears. Second, she thought, "Then he didn't plan to run away, or he would have taken this with him," and she stuffed them back in the can and closed the lid. Third, she tried not to think at all.

She looked around the room where there was so little evidence of Phillie's existence. She walked slowly to the couch, where she and Charlie had necked before they were married, and sank down, feeling weak in the knees. "Phillie," she thought, "come back. Please come back. Mother. Grandfather. Debby. Job. Waiting for you, dear." On the other hand, he was probably through with Debby, and he hated his job. "A silly girl friend. A musty basement. Foolish parents. Silly grandpa. World at war. No wonder he doesn't want to pay rent on it."

After a long while she got up. She was encouraged to find Phillie's shaving soap, toothbrush, and toothpaste in the bathroom cabinet. She cleaned the shower enclosure. She scrubbed the toilet bowl prayerfully, on her knees. "Lord," she thought, "give him the strength to do things right." She polished the mirror over the sink to make it ready for his reflection.

Contributors

ERIN McGRAW is the Editor of *Indiana Review*. (If she's as good at that as she is at writing, we're green with envy). She recently had a story in *Crosscurrents*. JOANNE ZIMMERMAN goes back with us: this is her third story in our pages. She's recently had stories accepted by *Arizona Quarterly* and *Kansas Quarterly*: her background includes publication in *Antioch Review, The Literary Review*, and *Western Humanities Review*.

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